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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 001202

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: 07/01/2013

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA -- PRESIDENT OBASANJO CONFIRMS
TAYLOR'S ASYLUM OFFER AND NIGERIA'S COMMITMENT TO
DEPLOY

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER. REASONS:
1.5 (B & D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: During a July 5 afternoon meeting with Ambassador Jeter, President Obasanjo stated that, despite the concerns of his security staff, he was committed to travelling to Monrovia to confer with Charles Taylor. He saw Taylor's extraction from Monrovia as an essential cog in the evolving peace machinery. However, Obasanjo noted that the situation was extremely complex and that Taylor's military machine, the LURD's and MODEL's, also needed to be dismantled for peace to stand a chance. Obasanjo claimed he would face domestic criticism for his active involvement in Liberia but that he could withstand the flak. He would move forward with offering Taylor asylum and with planning to deploy two battalions to Liberia if sufficient logistical assistance was provided by the international community. Discussion of the fuel price strike and other domestic political issues will be reported septel. END SUMMARY

OBASANJO ON HIS WAY TO MONROVIA

12. 2. (C) During a lengthy July 5 conversation with Ambassador Jeter, President Obasanjo revealed his plans to visit Liberia to confer with Charles Taylor at Robertsfield. Relaxed and unusually affable, Obasanjo said he had overridden his security officer's concerns that Taylor could not guarantee his security or that Taylor might somehow manufacture an incident for which he would blame the LURD. Ambassador Jeter told Obasanjo Embassy Monrovia had reported that Monrovia had been peaceful the past few days and that commercial flights were landing at Robertsfield. With that information, Obasanjo reconfirmed that he would proceed to Monrovia. (NOTE: Ambassador Jeter subsequently called the Department again to ask that Embassy Monrovia approach the GOL on the need for beefed up security to cover the Obasanjo-Taylor meeting. END NOTE)

13. (C) The purpose of the visit to Monrovia was two-fold, Obasanjo said. First he would renew his offer of exile to the Liberian leader. Obasanjo elaborated that he was willing to give Taylor an exit in order to stave off catastrophe in Monrovia. If Taylor were left without any option save the War Crime Tribunal, Obasanjo feared Taylor would prolong the fighting, dragging the country further down the path toward chaos. However, Obasanjo was emphatic that a mechanism should be found to render the Tribunal's indictment "inactive." He did not want to offer Taylor exile, only to find himself hounded by the international community to relinquish the Liberian President.

14. (C) Second, he was going to Liberia because he wanted to know exactly what Taylor wanted. Through Taylor's emissaries who had visited Abuja and his previous conversations with Taylor, Obasanjo noted that Taylor's position had been that departure prior to deployment of an international force would be premature and dangerous. It would create a power vacuum. Also, Taylor envisioned leaving Liberia with more than his immediate family. He apparently wanted to take much of his inner circle as well.

WHAT OF TAYLOR'S INNER CIRCLE?

15. (C) Ambassador Jeter emphasized the importance of not solely focusing on Taylor's exit as the solution to Liberia's violent conundrum. Taylor's removal was essential but did not constitute the entire machinery of peace. Prior to Taylor's departure, there must be an agreement on disarmament and demobilization; moreover, Taylor must lend his active imprimatur for his men to yield their weapons. Second, consideration must be given to the problem of Taylor insiders and notorious henchmen Benjamin Yeaten, J.T. Richardson and the like. These men have been with Taylor for years; they bear his mark and many have committed atrocities in his and in their own names; they too could be brought before the Special Court.

16. (C) To extract Taylor, yet leave them behind could simply invite continued fighting. The situation could become even more chaotic because of the possibility of Taylor's machine dividing into smaller, even rival groups, each controlled by one of Taylor's lieutenants who would have assumed the status of an independent petty warlord.

17. (C) In addition to providing for Taylor's exit, any tenable peace arrangement had to ensure that his chief lieutenants did not remain negative factors in the Liberia equation. For instance, if Nigeria choose to grant asylum to a larger number of people, they would have to actively push their forces to begin disarmament and demobilization before they would be granted exile along with Taylor.

LURD AND MODEL - BAD OLD WINE IN BAD NEW BOTTLES

18. (C) Ambassador Jeter continued that LURD and MODEL disarmament required as much attention as the GOL's. Disarming them would have to be simultaneous, since it was unlikely that Taylor partisans would disarm if their enemies still retained their weapons. Both the LURD and MODEL were headed by known miscreants, who wanted power, preferably by the force of arms. Their hope remained that they could sneak through the back door of the presidential mansion while everyone's attention was focused on escorting Taylor out the front. The LURD need to be pressured to disarm and its benefactors needed to turn off their support. Both rebel forces should be converted into political parties if their officials want to hold office. Any peace plan should avoid their inclusion in an interim or transitional government if at all possible, Jeter posited.

THOUGHTS ON THE TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT

19. (C) Regarding a transitional government, Obasanjo felt that Liberia should follow a constitutionally-scripted succession, leaving Vice President Moses Blah as the transitional Head of State. Ambassador Jeter agreed but cautioned that Blah's appointment must be worked delicately, given the ethnic dynamics of Liberia. He explained that Blah was an ethnic Gio for Nimba Country, the bedrock of Taylor's political and military support. Krahn personalities in LURD and MODEL, and to a certain extent, Mandingos in LURD, would be wary of Blah. With a Gio as Head of State, no Krahn and few Mandingos would be eager to disarm unless they were given adequate assurances regarding their personal security. Additionally, this could exacerbate tension along the common border between Nimba (Gio/Mano) and Grand Gedeh (Krahn) countries, possible spilling over to Cote d' Ivoire.

110. (C) Last, Blah has the reputation of a cipher. An interim government under his leadership would not command much respect or confidence; despite the uneasy relationship between Taylor and Blah, many Liberians would suspect that Taylor still would be pulling the strings, albeit from a distance. Obasanjo said that he appreciated the advice and would consider these admonitions.

NIGERIA: COMMITTED TO DEPLOY

11. (C) Obasanjo confirmed that he was prepared to send two Nigerian battalions to Liberia. He also made a strong pitch for American boots on the ground, stating that this would be of tremendous military and psychological value in making all armed groups behave. Obasanjo added, however, that Nigeria would only deploy if provided the needed logistical support.

12. (C) Obasanjo added that Libyan leader Qadhafi had written him, asking that Nigeria oppose deployment of U.S. troops in Liberia. Obasanjo sardonically remarked that he told the Libyan to communicate directly with President Bush and not use him as an intermediary. In a more serious vein, Obasanjo observed that Taylor had been talking with Tripoli. Obasanjo thought Qadhafi would provide some financial support to help smooth Taylor's asylum but that Tripoli would not assist in prolonging Taylor in power.

ASYLUM REVISITED

13. (C) Returning to the issue of Taylor's exile, Obasanjo said he had spent a lot of time thinking where to situate Taylor in Nigeria. At one point, he considered Katsina but thought the Moslem North would be too uncomfortable for Taylor and his cabal. Obasanjo finally decided on Calabar, Cross Rivers State. There was sufficient land for Taylor to pursue his farming and the climate and culture would be more akin to Liberia than any place in Northern Nigeria. Whatever location was selected, Nigeria had to make sure Taylor was safe but also sufficiently isolated and contained so that he could not interfere in Liberia, Jeter stressed. Obasanjo responded that Lagos was not an option because of this fear. Obasanjo added that Cross Rivers Governor Donald Duke was sufficiently adept to keep Taylor within acceptable bounds of behavior.

COMMENT

14. (C) While many Nigerians do not favor active re-engagement in Liberia, President Obasanjo sees the need and clearly recognizes that Nigeria is an essential actor to ending the slide in Liberia. He has taken a forward leaning stance on troop contributions. Moreover, beyond the establishment of a peacekeeping force, Obasanjo's exile offer to Taylor may be the most important single step in injecting the peace process with some momentum and giving the Liberian people some hope that change is imminent. While the War Crimes Tribunal indictment is unassailable and should not be ignored or dismissed, Obasanjo's asylum offer may be helpful to reaching a solution in Liberia. We should do all that we can to encourage Obasanjo to continue the leading role he seems willing to play.

JETER